

**The Flash of War:
How American patriotism evolved through the lens of *The Flash* comic books throughout
the Cold War era**

An Honors Thesis (HONRS 499)

by

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Abstract

Comic book superheroes became a uniquely American phenomenon beginning in the wake of World War II. The characters and situations often reflected and alluded to contemporary events. Comic books are a vibrant cultural artifact through which people can get a glimpse into the past. The way in which Americans view their country and their faith in the government changed rather drastically between the end of World War II and the end of the Cold War in 1991, when the Soviet Union was officially dissolved. Throughout the duration of this paper, patriotism, as a ideological product of culture, will be looked at through the lens of *The Flash* and *Flash* comic book series from 1956 when The Flash reappeared, after a period of censorship and decline in superheroes' popularity post-WWII, to the beginning of the 1990s. By looking at The Flash specifically, this thesis contributes to more nuanced research and further understanding of culture and the American view of patriotism during the Cold War era, a time of cultural and ideological upheaval.

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I would like to thank my brother Luke for being patient at comic conventions while I rifled through boxes and flitted between vendors to find just the right comic books. I was a bit of a whirlwind.

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Process Analysis

This whole idea for doing my honors thesis involving started at the beginning of spring semester 2016. I had recently fallen in love with the CW Network's new show *The Flash* starring Grant Gustin, one of my favorite actors. I originally started watching the show for him, and in general for my love of superheroes. Up to this point, Marvel movies were all that I was exposed to other than some of the awful DC movies. But I decided to give the show a chance, despite being a 'Marvel girl.' Within five episodes, Barry Allen/The Flash became my favorite superhero. I honestly still cannot describe in few words what Barry means to me but I connected with the character on another level that I had not had with any other superhero.

Even though I had fallen in love with the television show, in order to work in history so this honors thesis could also count for my HIST 440: Senior Research Project requirement, I decided to look to the comic books, which I had *never* read before; I was going into a thesis about comic books as an extreme novice. Little did I know I had over 75 years worth of the

Scarlet Speedster to look at. Not only did I need to narrow my focus, but I also needed to figure out a way to connect The Flash to historical events. When I was thinking about other comic book characters that had been around a while, Superman and Captain America immediately popped into my head; those two are probably the most stereotypically American characters in all of comic books. And there sparked the idea. Why not look at how patriotism in the United States evolved between the beginning of Flash's time speeding across panels in 1940 to nearly the end of the century with the fall of the Soviet Union. So much history happened between those 50 years and American cultural values also changed drastically. Other than my love for The Flash, I also chose the Sultan of Speed because he would be more of a challenge to find connections between patriotism and his stories because The Flash is not overtly patriotic like the Man of Steel or Cap.

As I began research for this thesis, it just so happened that Indiana Comic-Con was coming up in just a couple weeks at the end of April. My brother and I were already planning on going because we are giant nerds and Comic-Con is just the place for us, but then the trip also became an academic trip where I was just trying to find as many, cheap, Flash comic books beginning the Golden Age all the way through Bronze Age and Modern Era. I quickly found out that it was next to impossible to find original Golden Age issues without paying a fortune. This fact and later realizing that, although 50 years is not that much in the grand scheme of history, I would be struggling to adequately talk about these 50 years without the paper being extremely long, and extremely time-consuming. Time was something I had very little of looking forward. I was going into my final year at Ball State as an education major so I had rigorous practicum rotations, as well as other regular courses, to look forward in the fall as well as the daunting student teaching placement in the spring. Also while all of this was going on, I recently became

an executive director of Ball State University Dance Marathon, the largest student-run organization on campus. My time for things other than class and Dance Marathon became very little. It was at this point that I decided to narrow my focus even further to just include two of the three Flashes (Barry Allen and Wally West) that were in comic books during this era, thus making my time period from 1956-1990, i.e. the Cold War.

Comic Con also made me realize just how invested I was in this topic. One of the panels I went to at Comic Con was about history and comic books, obviously right up my alley. The panel was run by the owner of the only superhero museum in the world, which happens to be located in Elkhart, IN. Later after the panel, I went up to this man and was explaining how much I enjoyed the panel and what I was doing my thesis on. When I mentioned that I was looking at patriotism and The Flash, he gave me the funniest look. He remarked to me, sort of down-his-nose, that I should be doing it over Superman or Captain America. I told him that I wanted this thesis to be a challenge and that Flash was my favorite. He still did not quite understand and I left at that point. His snobbish remarks were really off-putting but it further proved to me that I loved my topic and wanted to continue with it, despite what a comic book expert said. Over the summer I continued to try and find comic books as well as secondary sources talking about comic books influence during the Cold War era, as that is what I described in my original proposal. I was lucky in that I found quite a bit of research in this field rounding out my ideas and furthering my own understanding.

Through a lot of time just reading comic books and other sources, this paper came to be so much more than I originally thought it would be. While The Flash himself is not wearing the colors of America, cultural values of Americans at the time, including censorship and containment, to fears of nuclear apocalypse and the Soviet Union/Russia in general, and even

identity crisis towards the end of the era, affecting patriotism and understanding of the country we live in were very clear in the pages; you just have to look. I have always considered my preferred history type to lean more towards cultural history and I think this idea and resulting paper shows this love of understanding people and their thoughts on the world at a given time.

Background

The Flash: The Sultan of Speed! The Monarch of Motion! The Flash, a superhero defined by his super-speed abilities, has gone by many flashy monikers since he sped into the comic book scene in January 1940 with the publication of *Flash Comics #1* by All-American Comics, one of the three companies that would eventually merge to become DC Comics. From his genesis to the present, The Flash has gone through a few incarnations. The super-speed abilities graced Jay Garrick from 1940-1951 (colloquially referred to as the Golden Age of comics). Super speed was bestowed upon Barry Allen from 1956-1985 (referred to as the Silver Age, and the Bronze Age from 1970-1985), and Wally West from 1986-2006 (referred to as the Modern Age), although Jay and Barry often reappear and have their own solo series again in more present issues. For the duration of this paper, Barry and Wally are the two Flash personas primarily discussed. In the early years of comic books superhero characters did not have their own series. Rather they would appear in individual issues of series like *Flash Comics* or *Showcase*. Finally, the majority of DC Comics characters, like The Flash live in a fictional United States, with major cities like Central City, Gotham, or Metropolis all alluding to actual cities in the U.S.

History of Era: The 1950s through 1990s were a tumultuous time for the United States in terms of cultural and societal norms. The mood of the time has been described as “shaped by two intertwined cultural moods: intense fear and a somewhat unfocused conviction that an urgent and decisive public response was essential.”¹ Post-World War II America, particularly the later 1940s into most of the 1950s, was keen to turn inwards again as to avoid another world war. The 1950s is often associated with traditional American stereotypes like the doting housewife and a perfect home life. Society was barely coming to grips with the realities of nuclear weapons. In the wake

¹ Paul Samuel Boyer. *By the Bomb's Early Light: American Thought and Culture at the Dawn of the Atomic Age*. Chapel Hill (N.C.): The University of North Carolina Press, 1994), 32.

of fascist governments falling after World War II, communism began to rear its seemingly hydra-like head. In America, communism and socialism (frequently confused and interchanged) was associated “with labor strife and oppressed ethnic or racial groups,” particularly during the Industrial Revolution and the turn of the century.² However, Americans found it difficult to fight something that is not a concrete entity. There are communists, but communism itself cannot be defeated. People who believed in communism were not pledging their allegiance to a nation or state, but rather to a philosophy. This allegiance to communism was nothing like what the United States was built upon, but rather (at least in the eyes of most Americans at the time) the complete opposite. That is what America fought throughout the entirety of the Cold War era, the threat of communism, visible or not. Communism became the ‘enemy’ but could not be targeted like any other foe America had previously. It threatened the stereotypical American dream through having people pledge allegiance to an idea rather than their home country.

Because communism could be anywhere at any time the American government, and subsequently the American public, began preemptively guarding itself against the threat. This included the beginning of the nuclear arms build-up, accusations against individuals and institutions of sympathizing with the Soviet Union (e.g., McCarthyism), containment, and censorship. While the nuclear arms and accusations in the vein of McCarthyism generally affected adults more than the youth of the time, censorship had major effects on the media that youth consumed in order to keep cultural and societal norms in tact.

Definition of Patriotism: A patriot is simply defined as “a person who loves his or her country, esp. one who is ready to support its freedoms and rights and to defend it against enemies

² Tom Engelhardt, *The End of Victory Culture: Cold War America and the Disillusioning of a Generation* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2007), 6-7.

or detractors.”³ While this definition of patriotism and nationalism, or “advocacy of or support for the interests of one's own nation, esp. to the exclusion or detriment of the interests of other nations,”⁴ sound similar, there are some key differences between the two. One interpretation of this is that “[t]he patriot says, 'I love my country,' works for its good, and defends it if necessary-against enemies within and without. He strives and prays not primarily that God will bless his country, but that his country will bless God. The nationalist, meanwhile, says, 'My country is better than yours.' 'My country is the greatest there has ever been.' 'The greatest nation on God's green earth.' 'They hate my country because it is so good.'”⁵ Historian John J. Dwyer argues that patriotism is more focused on the community as a whole rather than ‘the state,’ which he argues is what nationalism does – focuses on the state.⁶ Understanding this difference is key to follow the duration of this paper.

Introduction: Fall of the Golden

“Comic book superheroes are inherently political creatures. The genre is devoted to the adventures of powerful individuals compelled by circumstances and inclination to use their abilities to impose personal morality on the world through violence. The political possibilities are hard to miss.”⁷ When comic books began being released, they were primarily only supposed to be entertainment, and only wholesome entertainment at that. In the wake of anti-communist and

³ “patriot, n. and adj.”. OED Online. March 2017. Oxford University Press.

⁴ “nationalism, n.”. OED Online. March 2017. Oxford University Press.
<http://www.oed.com.proxy.bsu.edu/view/Entry/125289?redirectedFrom=nationalism>

⁵ Sudhanva D. Shetty. “There's A World Of Difference Between Patriotism And Nationalism.” Huffington Post India. July 14, 2016.

⁶ Connor Boyack. “Patriotism vs. Nationalism | Connor's Conundrums.” Connors Conundrums. March 13, 2007. <http://www.connorboyack.com/blog/patriotism-vs-nationalism>.

⁷ Tegan O'Neil. “How the Cold War saved Marvel and birthed a generation of superheroes.” The A.V. Club. March 31, 2016. <http://www.avclub.com/article/how-cold-war-saved-marvel-and-birthed-generation-s-233993>.

anti-patriotic sentiments, adults began looking to their children's media to find subversive messages that should be eliminated. The most popular media for children was comic book magazines or comic books. Even before World War II, comic books' growth of popularity was exponential. In a matter of five to six years (1933-1939), comic book publishing companies grew from one to eighteen; one ongoing title to more than fifty; and comic book releases grew from three in 1933 to 322 in 1939.⁸ Comic books' popularity continued to climb when the United States entered WWII and became among the preferred reading material of the American G.I.s. However, nothing solidified the place of comic books in American society like the emergence of the superhero. Between 1939 and 1941, some of the most famous superheroes starred in their first issues including Superman (the first "costumed" superhero), Captain America, Wonder Woman, Batman, Catwoman, Green Lantern, Aquaman, and The Flash, among dozens of others. These characters had powers of almost mythological proportions, battled villains from other dimensions, and were unlike anything previously seen in the comic sphere. Superheroes made the comic book business boom.

But, just as many superheroes gained incredible popularity, many quickly fell into complete obscurity. Despite the superhero genre's decline since its height in the early 1940s, with many superheroes being cancelled towards the end of the decade (The Flash or *Flash Comics* was cancelled in 1949), other genres like westerns, romance, horror and crime were being sold at rapid rates. Titles like "The Haunt of Fear" and "The Vault of Horror" were prevalent among the crime and horror genre and led to the fear that the entire comic book

⁸ Jean-Paul Gabilliet, Bart Beaty, and Nick Nguyen, *Of Comics and Men: A Cultural History of American Comic Books* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2013), 17.

industry, superheroes included, was plagued with grim, gruesome content. Comics were “condemned by critics as a source of delinquency and a threat to morals.”⁹

One adult in particular took this fear to an extreme. Dr. Frederic Wertham, a senior psychiatrist at the New York City Department of Hospitals, began his attack on comic books around 1948 resulting in the “bible of the censorship forces,” *Seduction of the Innocent*.¹⁰

Seduction of the Innocent was filled with sensationalized descriptions and illustrations of the horrors in comic books. Wertham argued that:

The cultural background of millions of American children comes from the teaching of the home, the teaching of the school (and church), the teaching of the street and from crime comic books. For many children the last is the most exciting... It arouses their interest, their mental participation, their passions and their sympathies, but almost entirely in the wrong direction... In vain does one look in comic books for seeds of constructive work or of ordinary home life. I have never seen in any of the crime, superman, adventure, space, horror, etc., comic books a normal family sitting down at a meal.¹¹

As a result of Wertham’s book, the Subcommittee to Investigate Juvenile Delinquency of the Senate Committee on the Judiciary launched its own investigation against the comic book industry in April 1954. In order to continue publishing and prevent government regulation, most major comic book companies banded together to form the Comics Magazine Association of America (or CMAA). The CMAA created their own self-regulated code by which all comic books published under these companies had to follow. Adopted on October 26, 1954, “The Comics Code of 1954” outlined what was not allowed in comic books, in particular categories like marriage and sex, crime, and language. In its preamble, the Code explained the intention behind the code: “The comic-book medium, having come of age on the American cultural scene,

⁹ Matthew J. Costello, *Secret Identity Crisis: Comic books and the Unmasking of Cold War America* (New York: Continuum, 2009), 7.

¹⁰ Ronald D. Cohen, “The Delinquents: Censorship and Youth Culture in Recent U. S. History,” *History of Education Quarterly* 37, no. 3 (Autumn 1997): 258, doi:10.2307/369445.

¹¹ Ibid.

must measure up to its responsibilities... To make a positive contribution to contemporary life, the industry must seek new areas for developing sound, wholesome entertainment.”¹²

Because of this censorship and regulation of the content of comic books, characters and their typical storylines changed. However, it is not just comic codes that affected how content was written. The Cold War era began an era of censorship and introspection as a result of containment policies. Containment in America went so far that even the most mundane activities, like reading a comic book, related back to the idea that communists were trying to infiltrate and subvert, or to simply destroy American culture. Therefore in this highly combustible cultural landscape, every cultural artifact, including comic books, were potential vehicles for infiltration.¹³ In the following decades, the United States saw major changes in its cultural and societal norms. Comic books and its contents reflected these changes. Comic books help to better view the cultural norms of American at the time through a lighter, visually stimulating lens perspective. This allows for deeper understanding of what patriotism, through culture, meant to Americans and how it changed as American society changed throughout the Cold War period.

Silver Age

Comic books experts generally consider the return of the popularity of the comic book superhero to be in 1956 when The Flash sped back on to the pages of comic books in *Showcase* #4 in the stories “Mystery of the Human Thunderbolt” and “The Man Who Broke the Time Barrier.” The Flash appeared in three additional issues of *Showcase*: #8, #13, and #14 between 1956 and 1959. Then The Flash took over the *Flash Comics* series at its current issue #105 and it

¹²“The Comics Code of 1954.” Comic Book Legal Defense Fund. <http://cbldef.org/the-comics-code-of-1954/>.

¹³ Chris York and Rafael York, eds., *Comic Books and the Cold War 1946-1962: Essays on Graphic Treatment of Communism, the Code and Social Concerns* (Jefferson (C.): McFarland, 2012), 46.

became titled *The Flash*. Barry Allen was different in several ways from the previous Flash, Jay Garrick. Jay was a college student working towards a double major in chemistry and physics who gained his powers through a hard water experiment accident. Barry was Central City Police Department 'police scientist' (i.e. a forensic scientist) who gained his powers via a bolt of lightning that shattered a chemical cabinet and covered Barry in the electrified chemicals. In many situations in his earlier stories, Jay would toy with the criminals who he foiled, almost as a practical joker. Barry, on the other hand, having been trained with the police, approached super-crime as an investigator, not just a fighter, and his scientific approach allowed him to come up with new and creative ways to use his speed. Barry took his enemies seriously and constantly tried to improve himself in order to better face his enemies. At the same time, the United States, had to take the Soviet Union more seriously as a global power, primarily through furthering American scientific advances in order to maintain their advantage and status on the world stage.

Barry and his early stories managed to encapsulate American ideology of the time. Through The Flash's abilities to speed his way out of trouble in order to contain anything that threatened the status quo, Americans could fantasize of doing the same with the threat of communism. The Flash protected his own Central City and the world from 'alien' threats as well as science-misusing petty criminals, considered of equal villainy both in the comic book world and the real world. Although Barry worked for the police, The Flash used extralegal means to prevent deviance. The American government represented both sides of his character: Barry's police career showed lawfulness, whereas The Flash's vigilante work alludes to the covert and morally questionable operations of the United States, justified in the pursuit of the greater good. Even his origin story of "science gone wrong" addressed fears of nuclear apocalypse and showed that everything turned out alright for the Flash and the idea that everything will work out in the

favor of the United States.¹⁴ In the age of intercontinental ballistic missiles (ICBMs) that could launch and land in a matter of minutes, who better to save the world than ‘the fastest man alive’? The Flash appealed to Cold War audiences “at least partially in his identification with the innocent and his continued defense of American values at a time when the “American way of life” was again threatened, this time by communism. The superhero provided a certain level of wish fulfillment for audiences that were anxious about threat to their personal and national security, including the possibility of nuclear annihilation.”¹⁵

Containment was not only the foreign policy tactic the United States government adhered to, but it also helped define culture. This can be seen in early Silver Age Flash comics. In the thirty-eight stories starring Flash during his first five years, the superhero contained threat to the status quo in twenty-five (usually criminals committing bank robberies or other disturbances), foiled invasions and other would-be conquerors and destroyers in nine stories, and in three stories he goes beyond containment of a threat to help liberate oppressed people.¹⁶ In two stories in particular the Flash engages in the Cold War directly, tackling spies who steal the blueprint for a hydrogen power device¹⁷ and preventing an atomic grenade from going off by keeping it spinning (the villain was Top whose power was to make things spin at incredible velocities) and sending it into space.¹⁸

Along with quelling the fears of society throughout the Cold War-era, Flash also represented everything “good” in society. As one issue’s title page states, “A superhero is a strange wonder of our time! He is idolized by millions... and hated by those profit from crime! A

¹⁴ Chris York and Rafael York, eds., *Comic Books and the Cold War 1946-1962: Essays on Graphic Treatment of Communism, the Code and Social Concerns* (Jefferson (C.): McFarland, 2012), 56.

¹⁵ Ibid., 59; *this quote was originally about Superman, but can be applied to Silver Age Flash as well

¹⁶ Ibid., 57

¹⁷ John Broome, "The Flash #121," comic book (New York City: National Comics Publications, 1961).

¹⁸ John Broome, "The Flash #122," comic book (New York City: National Comics Publications, 1961).

symbol of law and order... a reason for the hopeless to keep on hoping... the poor and underprivileged to keep on striving! And so it is with the world-renowned Flash!"¹⁹ Especially in the earlier issues, DC Comics editors made very clear that their superheroes were not glorified vigilantes. In fact, during the early Silver Age, "DC's comic books were the image of affluent America. Handsome superheroes resided in clean, green suburbs and modern, even futuristic, cities with shimmering skyscrapers, no slums, and populations of uniformly well-dressed white people."²⁰ Additionally, among the main male superheroes from DC, including the Flash, none of them stood out as individuals. They all reacted in a similar, predictable fashion towards criminal activity. They were always in control, rarely impulsive, and never irrational, thus modeling to children what the ideal person should be acting like in society. In fact, DC's comic books emphasized responsibility to the community over individualism, making their characters the ultimate patriots as by Dwyer's interpretation of patriotism. Anything individualistic or remotely nonconformist was considered criminal.

Two Flash stories represent this view extremely well. In *The Flash #116*, a member of an alien race disguises himself as a fabulous individual and uses his technology to get rich and evade taxes.²¹ His technology allowed him to see thirty minutes into the future in Central City. This allows him to gamble and win incredibly amounts of money as well as hide from law enforcement by escaping to other dimensions. In a later issue, a group of beatnik protesters contribute to criminal activity throughout the story. They are even shown beating The Flash up on the cover²² (Fig. 1).

¹⁹ Cary Bates, "The Flash #218," comic book (New York City: DC Comics, 1972).

²⁰ Bradford W. Wright, *Comic Book Nation: The Transformation of Youth Culture in America* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2003), 184.

²¹ John Broome, "The Flash #116," comic book (New York City: National Comics Publications, 1960).

²² Frank Robbins, "The Flash #185," comic book (New York City: National Comics Publications, 1969).



Fig. 1 Ross Andru, "The Flash #185," comic book, (New York: National Comics Publications [DC Comics], 1969). Cover.

More importantly, all DC superheroes were hyperbolically altruistic, as “[h]elping humanity was their only motivation.”²³ The Flash helped out his fellow Central Citizens outside of regularly saving their lives. In one issue, having defeated Top and retrieved the ‘Winged Victory’ statuette Top had stolen, Flash received reward money from the owners of the statuette (which is unusual). Instead of keeping it, Flash decided to start a ‘slum clearance program,’ as Iris West (who later becomes Barry’s wife) called it, which later developed into a low-cost housing development to house citizens like Jimmy who Flash saved earlier in the story.²⁴ Not only did Flash save Central City from the evils of Top, he saved the city from the horrors of homelessness.

Bronze Age

Much like the audience reading the comic books, the content of superhero narratives began to grow up. Stories took world issues more head-on and dealt with more ‘adult’ themes. While containment was still the government policy of the time, in the wake of the late 1960s, British Invasion and Summer of Love, issues of censorship had gradually diminished. One, no matter how old, could not escape the geopolitical issues of the time. This is apparent in *The Flash* comic books with more obvious allusions to foreign enemies, as well as Barry tackling more adult, real issues in his own personal life.

At this time, American presence in Vietnam neared its height and the communist fear was just as prevalent as it was two decades prior. It was also around this time that American faith and sense of patriotism in and for their country began to wean and take a different form. Many of the covert operations America was involved with, like the Iran and Guatemala coup d’états, came

²³ Bradford W. Wright, *Comic Book Nation: The Transformation of Youth Culture in America* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2003), 185.

²⁴ John Broome, “The Flash #141,” comic book (New York City: National Comics Publications, 1963).

into the public eye, though the American government did not take immediate ownership of any of it. It was also in 1969 that the My Lai massacre was revealed to the public after being covered up for over a year, causing many, if not a large majority of, Americans to openly oppose the War²⁵, which was rare up to this point. Patriotism was no longer blind nationalism but rather becoming an ideology based on knowledge and understanding, and having faith that the United States was doing what was best for the world as a whole.

Particularly beginning in 1969 and 1970, the authors, pencillers, and inkers were not shying away from the issues seen in the news every day. Issues were using more obvious allusions to and stereotypes of the Soviet Union and other foreign enemies and symbols of these groups. The issues were also using vernacular of the era regarding bombs and missiles. In *The Flash* #192, the main character that Barry tried to save is shown, in flashback, as having gone to fight in Vietnam, along with a couple scenes of him fighting “20 miles north of Quangngai,” a real place in Vietnam, which is coincidentally the province where the My Lai massacre took place. It should be noted that this issue was published in the same month, November 1969, that the news about My Lai broke but it is unlikely that the authors had any idea of the eerie coincidence. #192 also featured the main character and his wife, CIA agents, getting captured by a submarine with a prominent red star on the outside (Fig. 2).

²⁵ The My Lai massacre occurred during the Vietnam War where American Army soldiers killed between 347 and 504 unarmed civilians in South Vietnam on March 16, 1968. Victims included men, women, children, and infants. Some of the women were gang-raped and their bodies mutilated.

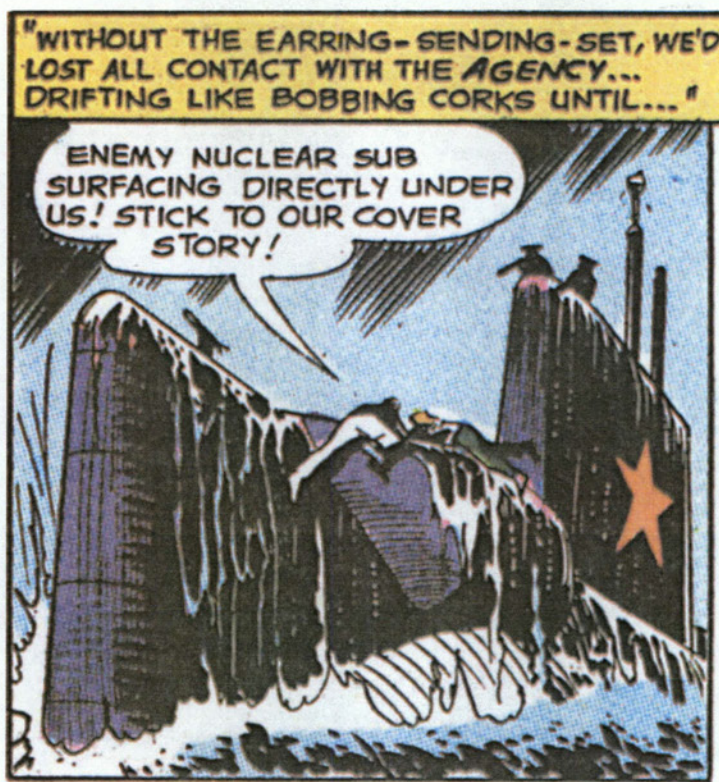


Fig. 2 Andru, Ross and Mike Esposito, "The Flash #192," comic book, (New York: National Comics Publications [DC Comics], 1969). 15.

Though a red star seems fairly arbitrary to the 21st century reader, the red star had represented communism and Soviet Russia beginning around 1917, when the Russian Revolution occurred.

Additionally in issue #192, Captain Vulcan, the eye-patched villain, talked of taking out America's Minute Men ballistics system, "leaving her helpless before the follow-up ICB attack!" Captain Vulcan also mentioned in the next panel that, "simultaneously, our devices will zero-in on your Polaris Deterrent Missile System."²⁶ Though Captain Vulcan is a fictional character living in a fictional universe, he talked about a very real ICBM that started tests around the same

²⁶ Robert Kanigher, "The Flash #192," comic book (New York City: National Comics Publications, 1969), 19.

time that President John F. Kennedy entered office, eventually entering official service in 1962.²⁷ The Polaris system is also an allusion to the Polaris missile program started by the U.S. Navy in the early 1960s. The Polaris missile could be launched from a submarine, much like the nuclear submarine Trident in this issue (which is captured by Captain Vulcan).²⁸ This talk of actual bombs in the United States was among the first in *The Flash* comics, showing that the information like this was not being withheld anymore, like it was under the 1950s and early 1960s censorship.

Issue #200 of *The Flash* was historic for the series as it had now been in circulation for just over ten years. It also has some of the most obvious allusions in the series of foreign enemies, as well as the possibility of being brainwashed by communism. Issue #200, titled "Count 200 - and Die!," has a foreign spy, Dr. Lu, brainwash the Flash into thinking he is bringing hairspray to his wife when he is really attempting to assassinate the president of the United States. Dr. Lu was able to create her brainwashing technology through the funding of foreign millionaires. Each of these foreign men represented current or foreign enemies of the United States. In this issue, these foreign millionaires are shown in a very stereotypical fashion (Fig. 3). The man wearing the keffiyeh says "By Allah! The 200 million we gave Dr. Lu is well spent," making it clear that he is from the Middle East, where the Soviet Union had influence throughout this era. There is a Russian man who shares obvious similarities to the Soviet premier Leonid Brezhnev, a German man who says that "Fraulein Doktor Lu makes Hitler seem like a

²⁷ "The 6555th's Role in the Development of Ballistic Missiles," The 6555th, Chapter III, Section 8, The MINUTEMAN Ballistic Missile Test Program, <https://fas.org/spp/military/program/6555th/6555c3-8.htm>.

²⁸ "Polaris." National Cold War Exhibition. 2013.
<http://www.nationalcoldwarexhibition.org/research/collections/polaris/>.

blundering amateur,” and a Chinese man who quotes Confucius when talking of Dr. Lu’s handiwork.²⁹



Fig. 3 Robert Kanigher, Irv Novick, and Murphy Anderson. “The Flash #200,” comic book, (New York: National Comics Publications [DC Comics], 1970). 4.

When The Flash went to kill the president with a laser beam, he got all the way into the President’s office and shoots the laser gun. However, in a moment of clarity, Flash realized what he had just done saying that it feels “as if an [I]ron [C]urtain’s been lifted from my mind.” Given the Iron Curtain’s prominent place in society’s vernacular, this allusion served as an obvious warning that even the Flash could be controlled by communist threats and that the audience should be on the lookout to prevent this same evil from entering their minds. Another more obvious allusion to Cold War politics found in the comics was in issue #203 titled “The Flash’s Wife is a Two-Timer” where it is revealed that Iris West-Allen was actually born in the 30th century, around 2945 A.D. Iris was sent back in time as a baby by her parents when ‘Earth-East’

²⁹ Robert Kanigher, “The Flash #200,” comic book (New York City: National Comics Publications, 1970), 4.

was about to attack 'Earth-West.' In this issue, Iris was brought back to the future. The Flash came to bring Iris back home but was stopped when he has to defeat Sirik from Earth-East, who wanted to take Iris as his mate. Flash defeated Sirik only to find out that Sirik has targeted missiles on Earth-West that would go off if he did not report back every half-hour. As a result of the battle between Flash and Sirik, a half hour passed and missiles began blasting off, only to be thwarted by Flash in the next two panels.³⁰

However, when the politics of the Cold War became more complex and America's actions in it came to be more and more questioned by American citizens, Barry similarly lost his way. Barry's life became riddled with hardships that never would have been portrayed in the previous decade and a half of publication. These hardships ended up as a domino effect that continually got worse as the issues progressed.

Hardships began with issue #275 titled "The Last Dance." In this issue, Barry and Iris went to a masquerade party where they accidentally brought Clive Yorkin, a mentally ill serial criminal with a grudge against Barry, in the back of their car. Barry and Iris were talking of having children when Barry drank a cup of punch, which caused him to get drugged. Iris ran to get Barry a glass of water and is soon heard calling out for help. Barry, in his incapacitated state, ran to find her only to discover Iris sprawled out on the floor with Clive Yorkin standing above her. The issue ended with a man dressed as Batman saying, "Got to get one of them to a hospital right away. But I'm afraid the other one... is dead!!"³¹ It is soon revealed that Iris was killed that night. Up until issue #283, it is assumed that Clive Yorkin is the killer, but while listening to a taped confession Barry discovered that it was his long-time foe the Reverse Flash that drugged Barry and killed Iris by vibrating his hand fast enough to essentially lobotomize her. It is also

³⁰ Robert Kanigher, "The Flash #203," comic book (New York City: DC Comics, 1971), 20.

³¹ Cary Bates, "The Flash #275," comic book (New York City: DC Comics, 1979), 17.

revealed in the same issue that not only did the Reverse Flash want to have Iris as his beau, he also wanted to take over the Central City heroin trade, which is why he had Flash dosed with drugs at the masquerade party – this is also a not so subtle allusion to the evils of the drug world in the 1970s which had been the subject of more government crack-downs as a result of President Nixon's drug war and the passage of the Rockefeller laws in New York City.³² Barry, upon learning everything, sent the Reverse Flash back to his home in 25th century to face justice, saying to his enemy, "I ought to pound your face a few million more times... but right now I'll settle for putting you to sleep!... And in case you've forgotten... the death-penalty is destined to be brought back in the 25th Century -- so once you're convicted you'll be given the execution you so richly deserve!"³³

As a result of his beloved wife being horribly murdered, Barry had to find a new love interest. Not long after learning everything about Iris' death, Barry met Fiona Webb, who would become his new significant other in an on-off relationship.³⁴ Beginning around issue #320, Barry and Fiona decided they are the only ones for each other and began planning a hasty wedding. The wedding took place in issue #323 but is thwarted by the Reverse Flash yet again who disguised himself as Barry and walked down the aisle and attempted to kill Fiona.³⁵ Barry battled the Reverse Flash in the next issue and accidentally snapped his neck. It should be noted that up until this point, The Flash vowed and stayed true that he would never kill to defeat his enemies. The fact that he killed Reverse Flash put Flash's place in the Justice League of America in jeopardy, to the point that it was put to a vote with Superman, the symbol of truth, justice, and the American way since 1938, being the ultimate decider. Superman argued that because this is

³² Maia Szalavitz, "A Brief History of New York City's Heroin Scene," Vice, December 14, 2015, https://www.vice.com/en_us/article/a-brief-history-of-the-heroin-scene-in-new-york-city.

³³ Cary Bates. "The Flash #283." comic book. (New York City: DC Comics, 1980). 16.

³⁴ Cary Bates. "The Flash #285." comic book. (New York City: DC Comics, 1980).

³⁵ John Broome and Cary Bates, "The Flash #328," comic book (New York City: DC Comics, 1983).

the only instance of Barry killing, and it was in pursuit of saving someone else, The Flash is not completely at fault and can remain in the Justice League.³⁶

However, just because Flash was clear with the Justice League did not mean that he would not face legal repercussions. Flash was charged for manslaughter in the death of Eobard Thawne (Reverse Flash) in issue #326 and convicted of second degree murder in issue #348, twenty-two issues later and exactly two years after issue #324 (when Reverse Flash was killed) was published. Flash eventually escaped prison in issue #350 and was taken to the 30th century to live out his days with Iris West-Allen, who was alive in that century because her soul was transported back there and transplanted into a body. Flash was also cleared of his murder charges in this issue when it is found out that the jurors were brainwashed into a guilty verdict, but Flash stays in the 30th century with his beloved.³⁷ Issue #350 was also the final issue of *The Flash* series. However this would not be the last time audiences would see The Flash. At the same time as these final issues of *The Flash*, another series involving nearly all of DC Comic 'super' characters, including The Flash, *Crisis on Infinite Earths* was being published. While much too complicated to be summed up in a few sentences, in *Crisis on Infinite Earths* #8 Barry Allen made the biggest sacrifice of all: he gave up his life in order to save the multiverse. In his final moments, while being melted away by anti-matter, Barry remarked, "[T]here's hope... There is always hope... Time to save the world! Do what you have to... we must save the world... We must save the world..."³⁸ It is as if Barry was talked directly to the audience who were still living in nuclear fear and still six years away from the fall of the Soviet Union.

³⁶ Cary Bates, "The Flash #327," comic book (New York City: DC Comics, 1983).

³⁷ Cary Bates, "The Flash #350," comic book (New York City: DC Comics, 1985). 37-40.

³⁸ Marv Wolfman, "Crisis on Infinite Earths #8," comic book (New York City: DC Comics, 1985), 23.

This complicated domino-effect arc was unlike anything seen in comic books at the time. Not only were dozens of issues connected together instead of being more serialized as like in the beginning of *The Flash* series in 1959 but also Barry was one of very few main superheroes to be killed off. This convoluted storyline can be summed up in a few words: Heroes can fall. These words are yet again indicative of the time. By 1985 America had been plagued by a couple lackluster presidents or ones that were perpetual liars. And after the absolutely abysmal failure of Americans in Vietnam, Americans' faith in their government and the things it stood for continued to decline. It could be said that it was around this time that apathy towards the government from Generation X, or Gen-Xers, began to bubble up from the depths. This generation saw that their opinions and actions in the pursuit of change were unheeded and ignored, so the generation stopped giving their opinion or working towards major changes. Yet despite the pure horrors that Barry experienced towards the end of his life, he was still willing to sacrifice himself for the greater good, signaling to the audience that in order to be a hero like The Flash, they would have to sacrifice themselves in some way. Throughout the 30 years that Barry Allen sped through the panels of comic books, culture and as a result patriotism, changed drastically, almost looking completely different. These changes continued to be present in the next reincarnation of The Flash, Wally West.

Modern Age

Wallace Rudolph West. Wally was a cousin to Iris West-Allen and cousin-in-law to Barry Allen. He was once Kid Flash, The Flash's protégé, but beginning in 1987, Wally West officially became the new Flash after merely filling Barry's boots (beginning in 1985 when Barry died), hoping that he was not actually dead. In the first issue of the *Flash* series, Wally

turned twenty years old. Although Wally took on the name of his longtime mentor, Wally and his stories differed quite a bit from the previous Scarlet Speedster. First, the writers, of the stories in the years leading to the fall of the Soviet Union, had many Russian characters opposing, and some later helping out, Wally. Additionally, Wally's characterization and portrayal was more 'real' when looking at the society and culture surrounding the creators of his stories. He actually represented the audience rather than heralding over it, representing changes in how the government was viewed in society and what it meant to have patriotism in America.

Perhaps one of the most obvious differences between Barry's and Wally's stories is the difference between the stories' references to or characters relating to Russia and the Soviet Union, albeit the fact that each reference/character is extremely stereotyped. At least half of the first fifteen issues of Wally's run, involved Russian characters and references, mostly negative. Beginning with issue #3 and continuing into issue #4, Wally was fighting against a computer-based villain named Kilg%re. Kilg%re was able to infiltrate any system connected to energy in the world, and eventually shut down the world's power grid. Prior to Kilg%re shutting down the grid, Flash, Tina McGee (a scientist at STAR Labs and Wally's soon-to-be girlfriend), Dr. Schmitz (scientist at STAR Labs), and Joe Kelly (a National Security Advisor) met altogether to have a video conference with the President. President Reagan addressed the group and asks if they had any reason to believe that the Russians are behind Kilg%re. Later in issue #4 Flash went to his fellow Teen Titan Cyborg seeking help and advice on how to take Kilg%re down. After a couple dud suggestions, Cyborg proposed that they convince the whole world to simultaneously shut down all power systems in order to scare Kilg%re out of the system. Wally remarked, "That's nuts. The Russians will never agree." Later after Kilg%re was defeated, Cyborg quipped

that he is going to give the okay to go back on-line but the Russians already had, and that it was a miracle they cooperated in the first place.³⁹

Another storyline involving Russian characters fighting against Flash began in issue #6 where Flash had to go into Soviet Russia to track down a bio-geneticist Doctor Orloff who would know how to fix Jerry McGee, Tina's husband, who went crazy after injecting himself with a steroid that granted him super speed. The steroid caused his kidneys to fail and massive internal hemorrhaging which was what sent Flash to Doctor Orloff. However as Flash began to talk to Doctor Orloff, Red Trinity, a Russian triplet group (modeled after the American Flash but have a prominent red star on each of their chests) who gained their super speed powers through experimentation, tried to intervene because Orloff was like their father. Flash explained the situation to Red Trinity and how he wished to take Orloff back to the United States. Anatole and Bebeck, two of the Trinity, expressed their interest in going to America as well, while their brother Cassiopeia did not want to leave Soviet Russia saying, "We are not free to go, we are wards of the state! Have you forgotten? It is the state which nurtured us, and given us our abilities. Is this how you would repay your motherland?" Bebeck argued that it was Doctor Orloff who gave them their powers, not the state. Cassiopeia retorted that their powers were given to them "[F]or the glory of socialism! Not so we could bolt for the West at the first opportunity!"⁴⁰ Cassiopeia only ended up deciding to go because of his vow to his siblings to always uphold their bond. In order to escape Soviet Russia, the group (Flash, Orloff, and Red Trinity) had to make it to the Finnish border, around 300 miles away from their location. In their attempt to escape, the group was caught by Soviet air force jets and soon thereafter Blue Trinity,

³⁹ Mike Baron, "Flash #4," comic book (New York City: DC Comics, 1987). 2, 10, 22

⁴⁰ Mike Baron, "Flash #7," comic book (New York City: DC Comics, 1987). 13.

the first attempt at a Soviet super speed group who are “excellent for simple brutality” rather than for creative work.⁴¹ Eventually the group got away and are able to make it back to America.

Lastly, probably the most obvious reference to the Russians involved a villain called Proletariat. Proletariat is a large, hulking man dressed in a black suit with a very prominent red hammer and sickle (symbol of Soviet Union) on his chest (Fig. 4).



Fig. 4 *Flash* #51, comic book, (New York: DC Comics, 1991). Title Page.

According to the Red Trinity, he was once a Russian hero and was one of their trainers. He was originally created during the Second World War as “the answer to Hitler’s master race.” It should be noted that on the page where Proletariat is revealed for the first time, Joseph Stalin is

⁴¹ Ibid., 19

prominently featured in the panel. Proletariat yelled while fighting Flash and the Kapitalist Kouriers that “[S]ocialism may be dead, but I will die fighting! But first I will take smug capitalism down with me!”⁴² At the time when this issue was published (June 1991), it was generally considered that the Soviet Union was no longer a world power, falling much like the Berlin Wall in 1989. It was not until the end of December 1991 that the Soviet Union was officially dissolved.

Both Red and Blue Trinity show up throughout resulting issues after their introduction early in the series. Due to their excitement at the prospects of capitalism, Red Trinity actually defected and converted into the Kapitalist Kouriers, a high-speed courier service. They were all about making money to become ‘more American.’ On a news interview they had this conversation with a reporter:

Kapitalist Kouriers: “Excuse me sir but we are no longer Red trinity; we are Kapitalist Kouriers and we want to make money as fast as possible so people will like us.”

Reporter: “I... um... see. Well that certainly is laudable... Um, what is your impression of America in the time you’ve been here?”

KK: “whatever we see on television. We see people happy because they have money. We see people starving because they do not have money. We see people hating each other because some have jobs and other do not. We wish only to fit in so we work very hard! We hate Russia! We love America!”⁴³

Along with the Red Trinity conversion into heroes, a member of Blue Trinity eventually defected and became Lady Flash, Flash’s right-hand woman and possible love interest when they shared a kiss at the end of issue #51.⁴⁴ The authors of these stories do not shy away from covering up the issues between the Soviet Union and the United States as authors had done in the past, mostly with Barry. There was no longer a censorship and containment state of mind in America. The stories and threats were as real as they could be as a fictional comic book about speedsters.

⁴² William Messner-Loebs, “Flash #51,” comic book (New York City: DC Comics, 1991). 13.

⁴³ William Messner-Loebs, “Flash #15,” comic book (New York City: DC Comics, 1988).

⁴⁴ William Messner-Loebs, “Flash #51,” comic book (New York City: DC Comics, 1991). 21.

Authors were, in a way, encouraging their audiences to be against these Russian characters through the very end. After 1991, Russian characters were fewer in numbers in *Flash* comics showing the end of an era.

The other main difference between Barry's and Wally's stories was that from the beginning of the new *Flash* series, Wally was living in the 'real' America. While Barry lived in the America where locations alluded to real places, Wally actually lived in New York City and received a commendation from the actual Governor Cuomo, who, in reality, was known to be liberal and openly against the politics of Reagan. This reality in Wally's stories represented a change in the collective cultural mindset where once comic books were an escape from the fears and horrors of the real world but were now a reflection of society, and made readers feel less alone in their struggles. And since Wally was living in the real world, he was dealing with real issues. Wally was often written in stories where he encountered intense situations, the writers, pencillers, and inkers leave no detail to the imagination. For example, Wally encountered a man who was mortally wounded in the pursuit of finding out the identity of an evil man, who turned out to be Vandal Savage. Wally could not save the man because he has to deliver a heart to a woman in Seattle. When Wally returned home in New York City, immediately after learning that he has won the lottery, he discovered a wrapped package on his kitchen table that he assumed was from his girlfriend Francine but once he opened it up, he discovered a human heart, the heart of the man he left behind, given to him by Vandal Savage.⁴⁵

In addition to dealing with very intense situations not previously seen in *Flash* comics, Wally's characterization and portrayal was vastly different to Barry's, representing a more open society. Wally was shown in more provocative, uncensored, and real situations. One quirk to

⁴⁵ Mike Baron, "Flash #1," comic book (New York City: DC Comics, 1987).

Wally's characterization is that because Wally suffered a lot more from running extensive lengths, unlike Barry (he would have to take breaks and eat horrendous amounts of food just to keep his metabolism up; at one point it also caused him excruciating pain just to run), Wally would often ask for something in return for his services during his times of pennilessness, like health insurance.⁴⁶ Wally was also quite the ladies' man, moving from woman to woman fairly quickly. Within the first eight issues of the new *Flash* series, Wally had two girlfriends while Barry had only two women in his life in 30 years, Iris and Fiona. The authors also made hints towards Wally having sex with his partners (outside of marriage), such as when Wally gave Francine a lingerie-like top, the next panel is completely black with a blue text box saying, "Not everything is done at super-speed. Like sleep for instance."⁴⁷ While this was not a direct reference to them having intercourse, it strongly alluded to it. Wally, along with the other characters, was also shown to curse significantly more, which is a juxtaposition against both the Comics Code Revision of 1971 and 1989, which said that profanity was prohibited, leading to the belief that perhaps words like 'damn' and 'hell' (the primary words Wally is seen saying) were not considered profane when these issues were published. There was also a longer storyline involving drug addiction that Wally is trying to combat. Vandal Savage was injecting people with Velocity 9 (a speed drug similar to what made Jerry McGee go crazy) and caused major problems in those people's lives. At this time in the late 1980s and early 1990s, it seemed like drug addiction was returning with the popularity of crack cocaine. Again, the authors were not shying away from the realities occurring in their world, showing audiences that the problems they were seeing were not isolated (even if it was a fictional world) and that something could be done to fix or even just quell the problems around them.

⁴⁶ Mike Baron, "Flash #1," comic book (New York City: DC Comics, 1987).

⁴⁷ Mike Baron, "Flash #2," comic book (New York City: DC Comics, 1987). 20.

Finally, and perhaps the most compelling ‘real-world’ situation Wally tackled is his mental health and state. In *Secret Origins Annual* #2, it is revealed that Wally had been going to psychological therapy for months, trying to get his speed back to its childhood prime. The fact that such a prominent superhero was seeking counseling speaks volumes of the changing times when looking at the recognition of mental health issues in society, as before this, mental health was infrequently recognized or acknowledged as a legitimate health problem. Wally also had mental blocks preventing him from being as fast as Barry, and laments that any authority figure, namely Barry and his own father, in his life is gone. On top of all of this, Wally was living in poverty once again after losing his lottery winnings. The psychologist suggests perhaps the glory of Barry Allen as the Flash was more harmful against Wally than he thought. He called this “imposter’s syndrome.”⁴⁸ While Wally did not take the psychologist’s word at first, he began to come into his own as Flash. This is reflected stylistically with the changes to costume and art in 1991, as his stories came under new direction with new writers, inkers, and pencillers. This identity crisis shares similarities to the Gen Xers identity issues in having to live up to their parents, the Baby Boomers. Barry represents the Boomers while Wally is the Gen Xers who are mostly unable to live up to their predecessors ‘glory days,’ or at least are not choosing similar paths to their parents.⁴⁹ The authors at the end of the 1980s and early 1990s were part of Generation X and put their fears and frustrations into Wally’s character to get some sort of release.

⁴⁸ William Messner-Loebs, "Secret Origins Annual Vol. 2 #2," comic book (New York City: DC Comics, 1988).

⁴⁹ David M. Gross and Sophronia Scott, "Living: Proceeding With Caution," *Time*, July 16, 1990, <http://content.time.com/time/subscriber/article/0,33009,970634-1,00.html>.

Conclusion: The Legacy in Red

Superheroes are uniquely American inventions. Looking at superhero comic books allows for a unique glimpse into American culture, as George R.R. Martin said, “If you look at a culture of myths, you have a better sense of who they are as a people.”⁵⁰ The Fastest Man Alive and his stories may not be stereotypically patriotic or American as characters like Superman or Captain America, but the hero and his stories do reveal a great deal about cultural changes and, the result, the evolution of the collective America’s understanding of patriotism. The creators of the comic book stories were able to comment on the world around them in a creative manner that was also incredibly entertaining to read and follow. The creators were able to “play out [our] anxieties and [our] fears.”⁵¹ Audiences initially looked up to characters like The Flash who often represented the American government but gradually began to relate to these superheroes as shown through the characterization of Wally West, who was more like the audience reading his stories, showing that one did not have to be stereotypically patriotic in order to be a patriot.

Through this research, society can see the value of comic books outside of pure entertainment. Comic books have their place in analyses of culture during the Cold War as they were the most popular entertainment medium amongst half the population, children and young adults. Looking at *The Flash* comic books, specifically, challenges the reader to go beyond stereotypical and overt American patriotism and look for the subtleties and complexity of the culture at the time in a series that might otherwise be overlooked in regards to patriotism because it is not as stereotypical as *Superman* or *Captain America*.

Still today, The Flash continues to captivate audiences both in the comic book sphere and on the small screen. Throughout all versions of the Scarlet Speedster, he is approachable,

⁵⁰ Warrior Poets, prod. "American Legends." In *Superheroes Decoded*. History Channel. April 30, 2017., (0:00:52)

⁵¹ Ibid., (0:02:02)

relatable and despite all the hardships in his life and many times where he stumbled, he continues to do good. His stories create a message for all peoples: that they can have hardships and be confused by their own lives and still be a hero.

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